

Leadership for Change in the Veterinary Industry

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Thesis (research only)

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1. Executive Summary

Staff wellbeing in the veterinary industry is well below expectations. This affects not only existing but new staff entering the profession and has a knock-on effect on clients and for animal welfare as high staff wellbeing is essential for quality customer service and animal care. This then risks the viability of the business.

This study investigates the factors needed for success in achieving high staff wellbeing while still meeting veterinary practice (VP) business goals. Following employer interviews, a work environment survey, focus groups and a client survey to ensure clients are also highly satisfied, three in-depth case studies are presented to show that staff wellbeing can be attained in a veterinary business context. While there is no set recipe to follow there is considerable congruence between the case studies and the themes provide a guideline for VPs wishing to actively improve their staff wellbeing. This is not only the right thing to do but is required by Section 36 of the New Zealand Health and Safety at Work Act 2015. The three in-depth case studies presented have been successful without yet solving the industry challenges around financial rewards to staff.

Factors such as a clear vision and values which are lived daily by being embedded into the language, clear KPI's for wellbeing, kind and collaborative leadership, a whole team approach to creating solutions, taking on feedback positively and using this to continue making improvements and positive communication. A successful VP does not have to be perfect, but they are attuned to receiving feedback and working collaboratively as a team to solve issues. These in-depth case studies all consider themselves learning VPs and this applies to both staff and students on work placement.

This study has significance to current and future employers and employees of the veterinary profession. Implementing the recommended changes and improving staff wellbeing should lead to positive impacts on staff retention, client satisfaction and animal welfare all of which will contribute to the financial success of the business. To maximise the chances of success VPs should ensure baseline wellbeing is measured and engage some external support to help guide and mentor them.

2. Definitions

AVP/AVPs (plural)	Allied Veterinary Professionals – Veterinary Nurses, Veterinary Technicians, Large Animal Technicians
APC	Annual Practicing certificate, required by veterinarians
Club practice	Non-profit structure owned by a group of farmers, practice has a governance board, all profits are distributed back as rebates to clients and bonuses to staff.
Corporate practice	practice is owned by a large group, the owners are absent from the practice day to day, but a manager is in place.
CPD	continuing professional development
GP	general practitioner, first opinion practice
KTO office	Kaitohutohu office at Otago Polytechnic
MPP	Master of Professional Practice
NZVA	New Zealand Veterinary Association
NZVNA	New Zealand Veterinary Nursing Association
Paraprofessionals	reception staff, administration staff
VP/VPs (plural)	Veterinary Clinical Practice
Social Sustainability	Looking after the people, ensuring their needs are met. In the context of the workplace this is that they can come to work and feel safe, empowered, and be rewarded enough that they can meet their needs.
Support Staff	AVPs and Paraprofessionals such as receptionists, office managers and retail managers
VCNZ	Veterinary Council of New Zealand
WES	Work environment survey

3. Attestation of Authorship

Student Name: Francesca Nicole Brown

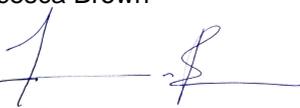
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Date of Submission: 31st August 2020

Attestation of Authorship

"I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of an institution of higher learning".

Name: Francesca Brown

Signature: 

Date: 31st August 2020

5. Introduction

In this practitioner thesis I describe the development of my research project to identify case studies that show that we can have both staff wellbeing and profit in VP in New Zealand (NZ).

In this first chapter of my practitioner thesis, I describe why leadership for change is needed in this profession and a summary of the research aims.

I continue in the next chapter with a literature review that gives some industry context and highlights the industry challenges that impact wellbeing. This is followed by a chapter explaining the methodology I used to identify three case studies and the common themes between the case studies.

I then document my research findings at each stage of the research, as the body of information grew. From here I tie it all together in the discussion and summarise the key attributes of the case studies that are the take home messages for all VPs.

Why is leadership for change needed?

VP sustainability is under the spotlight in terms of both financial wellbeing and the wellbeing of its staff. We live in a world where clients value their animals more, know more and expect more but may or may not be willing to pay for it. Staff in VPs also recognise it is no longer personally sustainable, or indeed best for their clients and patients, to sacrifice everything for their chosen profession.

The literature is clear that looking after staff and ensuring their wellbeing while at work is not only required by law but is required for business success. Despite this, the hidden and not so hidden costs to the VP of poor staff wellbeing, including high staff turnover, poor client satisfaction, and negative impacts on VP profit are not well accepted by many VP owners. Common misconceptions I have experienced in the industry, when explaining why staff wellbeing cannot be addressed include:

- “at the end of the day it’s a business”.
- “at the end of the day we answer to the shareholders”.
- “we just can’t do anything because the clients won’t pay for it”.
- “the issues are industry wide, we can’t change until the industry changes”.

The veterinary industry needs evidence, practical advice, and leadership, to help transform the industry toward a more sustainable future.

Action research for positive change

This is an action research study that moves through a series of phases to identify and then showcase three VPs in New Zealand that have focused on, and are demonstrating, excellent staff wellbeing while meeting their financial business goals. The literature review explains why a focus on staff wellbeing is essential, and the case studies show that excellent staff wellbeing can be achieved while meeting or exceeding business profit goals and resulting in high client satisfaction. While the industry wide issues remain, building healthy VPs provide a platform for beginning to address these industry wide issues.

The outcome is a clear and accessible piece of research that provides clarity to the profession on why they need to act now, and what they need to do to improve staff wellbeing to have a positive impact on veterinary workplaces. The study has enabled me to grow my direct connections with the industry, find allies in the industry who support the work and want to be part of the change, and gives authenticity to my voice. It has helped grow my confidence and encouraged me to keep moving forward and be one of the drivers of this change. Finally, it has inspired me to continue researching and expanding my knowledge and experiences, which will further grow my position as a leader for change.

Summary

In this chapter I have explained the background of this project and its aspirations to drive leadership for change. In the next chapter I will summarise some of the existing literature relating to staff wellbeing in the context of the veterinary industry to provide a frame for my research.

6. Literature Review

In this literature review I review industry context relating to the importance of the industry to animal welfare and the contribution that animals make to human wellbeing. I then review some of the industry trends and concern within the industry regarding the wellbeing of its workforce and why wholesale industry change is needed.

The benefits of animals to humans are clear and there is an increasing push worldwide to improve animal welfare (both physical and mental wellbeing). Animal welfare is a primary concern for the Ministry of Primary Industries in New Zealand (Ministry of Primary industries 2020), not only in the farming context where it is important to consumers and will result in higher value products (Napolitano et al 2008) but in the domestic setting too.

Owning pets is known to offer significant benefits to their human owners in terms of mental and physical wellbeing (Cowie 2005). Increasingly animals are being used to assist in human wellbeing programmes such as reading to a dog in schools for reading confidence, visits to (or as residents in) rest homes, supporting autistic children, riding for the disabled, as well as the highly trained service dogs such as police dogs and guide dogs (Walker and Tumilty 2018).

VP is centred around people who own, love and/or work with animals and is about achieving excellent outcomes for the animals and their owners. In other words, it is client focussed. Veterinarians and their support staff team are central to maintenance of animal health and welfare. If personnel working in the veterinary industry are not having their needs met, then animal welfare is likely to suffer.

The wellbeing of veterinarians is reported repeatedly as being lower than expected, with higher than average depression and suicide risk being up to four times higher than the general population (Weston 2011). Weston (2011) also noted that females and perfectionists are more at risk of depression too. An industry with high numbers of female support staff, significantly growing numbers of female veterinarians (Jillings 2020) and a drive from all of them to get the best outcome for each animal point further to an industry at high risk.

From my review of the literature I have identified the following industry themes that are important to this research:

Health and wellbeing in the industry is of serious concern

The maintenance of health and wellbeing is linked to business success (Krapivin 2018). This is increasingly being understood and acted on by CEO's around the world (Allen 2019). Ricketts and Marchant (2017) argue that a happy VP is likely to be a successful one. But despite the clearly documented links between wellbeing and success, the health and wellbeing of veterinarians and the support staff within the industry is under significant pressure and business owners have been resistant to change.

According to the Merck animal health veterinary wellbeing study recently published in the USA, debt, stress, and suicide were the top concerns of veterinarians. The study found that the level of psychological distress was only slightly higher than that of the general population, however only 41% of veterinarians would recommend the profession to others; including many who scored highly in health and wellbeing (Nolen 2018). Although student debt in the USA is significantly worse than in NZ, debt levels versus earning power are still of concern for NZ veterinary graduates.

McErlean (2013) identified the veterinary profession, internationally, as a high-risk group for suicide. Other high-risk groups, such as the police and anaesthetists, have similar issues such as stress, desensitisation, and the means to self-harm, but have achieved encouraging results in reducing self-harm. Some of the successful strategies identified include support of colleagues around known stressful incidents and preventing solitary or out-of-hours access by any "means".

A recent study looked at workplace bullying and relationships with health and performance among a sample of NZ veterinarians (Gardner and Rasmussen 2018). Although this study was self-selected and focussed only on veterinarians, it showed a prevalence of bullying, with approximately 16% of participants meeting the criteria of being subjected to bullying. A culture that is accepting of bullying will have negative impacts on social wellbeing.

The NZ Health and Safety at Work Act (2015) requires attention to wellbeing of people in the workplace. Section 36 clearly identifies that the person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) has a primary duty of care to its employees, and this extends to more than provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), and servicing equipment. Issues that affect wellbeing must be in a health and safety register with a management plan that is written and followed. This includes work related stress, fatigue, including compassion fatigue and burnout. Based on a telephone conversation with WorkSafe NZ, who are tasked with ensuring compliance with this Act, there is a risk of liability to the PCBU if burnout or any other mental illness is diagnosed officially, and the cause is documented by a medical professional as being work related.

Loss of veterinarians from VP is of concern to the industry today, which is struggling to recruit and retain staff and work environment is likely to have a strong impact. Career change among New Zealand veterinary graduates is the subject of a PhD study which will shine more light on the problem (King 2018). Despite there being limited literature, the loss of support staff to the profession is significant too.

Limited diversity in veterinary practice

Diversity is important in workplaces (Shemla 2018). The veterinary profession in New Zealand is disproportionately European as shown in Table i. Based on current cohorts of graduating veterinarians, compared to New Zealand society, veterinarians under-represent Māori, Pasifika, and Asian populations (Jillings 2020).

Table i – Cultural Identity of Graduating Veterinarians (Jillings 2020)

Cultural identity	Current profile of graduating veterinary classes	Profile if it reflected NZ society
Maori	2	16
Pasifika	1	8
Asian	4	12
European	93	64

The veterinary profession also has a growing proportion of females. It was 50:50 in the graduating class of the 1980's and is now 80:20 in favour of females (Weston and King 2020). In addition to the growing number of females, that data identifies that females work less hours per week on average and goes on to say more support is needed for females to re-enter the profession after taking time off raising families (Stevenson and Eden 2012).

There is little or no data on the demographics of support staff but based on ethnicity and gender of students in these fields at Otago Polytechnic, over 95% are female and over 85% identify as NZ European.

This limited diversity risks lack of innovative thinking and fresh approaches to problems. This may also contribute to a resistance or inertia to wholesale sector change. It also risks making the profession feel less accessible to the full spectrum of the population. Lack of diversity has been identified (Jillings 2020) as an area that needs to be resolved by the industry. Diversity is not something that is directly addressed in this study, but it is important to be aware of this to understand the profile of the industry as it is today.

Gender prejudices

Judd (2017) challenges long held beliefs and attitudes toward race in NZ society. The concepts explored can be applied to the veterinary profession where there is evidence of long held beliefs and prejudices that are likely to be holding the profession back.

Things are changing slowly but there are ingrained prejudices that result in some of the following attitudes:

- “women aren’t strong enough”
- “women don’t last in the profession”
- “women only work part time”
- “if you don’t want to devote your whole life to this profession James Herriot style then you aren’t committed”
- “if you aren’t a clinical veterinarian you are a failure”
- “AVPs are easily replaceable”

These are all prejudices that I have seen, experienced myself and/or have heard from many females in the field both in VP and those working in veterinary roles outside VP. Vice Chancellor Chris Kelly at Massey University in 2016 made comments about female veterinarians not wanting responsibility. This is an example of this prejudice being verbalised (Harris 2016). Prejudice can fuel a toxic culture and affects social wellbeing.

As noted, Stevenson and Eden (2012) identify that females work on average less hours per week and state that more support is needed for females to re-enter the profession after taking time off raising families. While this support can only be good, the underlying assertion that only females will take extended time off is an interesting one to challenge and raises these questions.

- Is the industry (and society in general) reinforcing gender stereotypes with these sorts of statements?
- If the language changed, would men wish to take more time out to raise families?

Personal accounts found in private groups on social media sites such as Facebook, have revealed females in industry who have experienced prejudice and missed opportunities (for example becoming a shareholder). Some suggest that this is not the case and perhaps the problem is females just do not stand up and say what they want. This raises questions as to whether this is related to personal factors (e.g. a person's own self-confidence) or if it is related to the VP environment, or a combination of factors.

The industry is experiencing significant change

Guilford (2005) identifies a megatrend in the industry of reduced tolerance for previously accepted professional authoritarianism. There is an increasing emphasis on work-life balance, instead of the previously accepted “James Herriot” style VP of working 24/7, often on your own, with access to little technology, and limited record keeping. Hay (2007) highlights that dramatic changes are occurring in the veterinary industry including increasing client knowledge, more advanced technologies, and in the needs and desires of the workforce. These dramatic changes in client knowledge and technologies are occurring year on year and industry personnel are still wanting increased work-life balance. Yet 15 and 13 years respectively after the publication of these papers, anecdotal evidence from students and employees, and the raft of posts on social media and articles in industry magazines suggests that the needs and desires of many personnel in VP are still not being met.

Further key trends are identified by Richards (2015) including increasing consumer expectations, feminisation of the industry, expansion of both referral and emergency centres and of corporate VP, and the impact of technology change are also important to keep in mind. Richards (2015) also states that an evolution of the workplaces that needs to occur and should include more support for the employees in things like flexible rosters, wellbeing support and back to work programmes. These Australian trends are in line with what is being seen in NZ.

Merchant (2015, July) describes the differing models of VP ownership, including the fact that in New Zealand, non-veterinarians can own VPs, which is not seen widely across the world. Different VP ownership models offer different pros and cons. Identifying these from an employee perspective would be useful to see if certain models are associated with better leadership and subsequent staff wellbeing.

Quality leadership and communication is needed to lead change

Hay (2007) explains how effective communication is at the root of managing change. Effective communication requires the right culture, which requires the right leadership. In the veterinary industry many people that end up owning VPs, or are in a senior position, do not get there through leadership skills but through a set of circumstances and seniority. Consequently, they may not have the appropriate training or leadership style to be effective. Sinek (2017), identifies that without sound leadership, business success can also be affected. It is encouraging to see that there is now a student veterinary business group, which is active in giving student veterinarians insights into business ownership (Guesgen, 2018).

Tier (2006) describes the qualities of an effective leader and then looks at VPs in Australia. The VPs doing well are those who employ a VP manager with good leadership skills. The paper included a case study of a VP that was turned around with good leadership. This demonstrates that the leadership style and skills can make a difference to overall VP success. The paper identifies five leadership practices by Kouzes and Posner:

- *model the Way*
- *inspire a Shared Vision*
- *challenge the Process*
- *enable Others to Act*
- *encourage the Heart*

These can be used to identify leadership qualities or improve an individual's leadership.

For NZ, the question is: is current leadership within the veterinary industry such that the industry can succeed, measured not only by profit, but by social measures of staff wellbeing, loyalty and community impact?

Limited literature that examines the wellbeing of the whole veterinary team

The literature looking into VPs themselves focuses almost solely on veterinarians, with limited attention to the support staff.

Gone are the days when VPs are focussed on the veterinarian, who may have been the only trained staff member. Now AVPs and other support staff are highly trained professionals and can fulfil many important roles in the VP supporting the patient and veterinarian for improved outcomes.

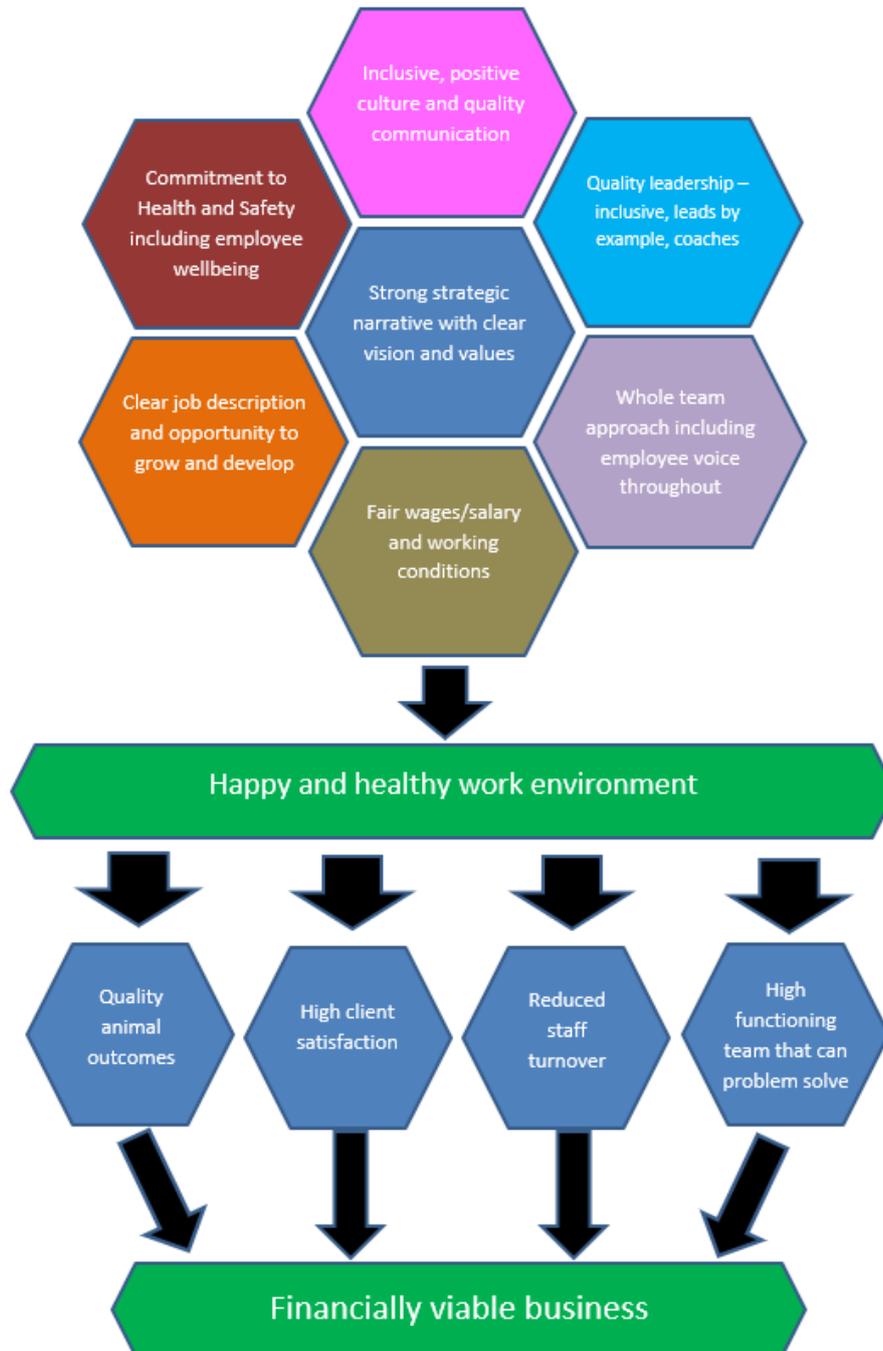
Preliminary research by Kimber and Gardner (2016) investigates healthy workplaces for veterinary nurses. The research identified important factors including communication, workplace design, work life balance, team relationships, access to resources containing coping strategies for this profession and professional training. Kimber and Ratcliffe (2017) described the 3 E's of occupational wellbeing (engagement, exchange, exhaustion) in terms of veterinary nurses. This research investigates why individuals stay in veterinary nursing and how they stay and manage to thrive when operating in high-demand, high-strain, dangerous and underpaid roles. They conclude that improving coping and communication strategies may encourage positive workplace behaviours and occupational commitment as well as reducing burnout and intentions to resign. Both studies align well with studies focussing on veterinarians.

If the industry is to make real steps forward the whole staff complement needs to be considered in studies focussed on VP teams, otherwise the notion of veterinarians "superiority" (conscious or subconscious) and support staff as commodities, rather than the professionals they are in their own right, is likely to stall progress in improving industry wellbeing and therefore business success overall.

Potential solutions

In addition to the literature outlining the problems, there is literature that outlines potential solutions. Collating the findings of Hay (2007), Sinek (2017), MacLeod and Clarke (2009), Merchant (2015, March) Weston (2017), Gibson (2018), Phelan (2009) Figure 1 summarises the factors that are likely to correlate with a happy and healthy work environment and subsequent business success.

Figure 1 - Factors Likely to Correlate with a Happy and Healthy Work Environment and Subsequent Business Success (developed by author)



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Summary

The animal: human bond is a strong one, animals are playing an increasingly important part in our lives and there is an associated growth in focus on animal wellbeing. It is essential that the people that look after the health and welfare of these animals are also looked after. Evidence suggests the industry is not universally doing this well and indeed is resistant to meaningful change. The key industry trends are well established and have been in published literature for over 10 years. However, the shift in industry to being responsive to changes needed to the business model, especially in terms of staff wellbeing and thriving within these changing times is overall inadequate, and this should be of considerable concern to the industry.

While there are a vast number of studies that identify the changes needed to become more socially sustainable and these have widespread agreement, the information tends to focus on veterinarians, rather than the VP (and staff) as a whole and overall lacks practical advice on how to do it. The industry would benefit from case studies that cover the whole VP approach, rather than just certain aspects (Gibson 2018), to demonstrate that change leads to successful and happy VPs. Also needed is a toolbox to guide them. An industry that is supportive of each other, providing mentorship and guidance from those who have been successful in helping others is essential too.

This set of literature provides insights into the practices that I should expect to be evident in a well-functioning VP, where staff wellbeing and morale are high, and turnover is low, as summarised in figure 1.

I have designed this study to identify VPs that have high staff wellbeing and are financially sustainable businesses in New Zealand. The aim is to ascertain whether the factors discussed in the literature are factors in the success of these VPs, and then to present this in a way that encourages VP owners to make meaningful change: change which will ultimately have positive impacts for them, their staff, their clients and on animal welfare. My approach to this will be discussed in the next chapter on methodology.

7. Methodology

In the previous chapter I explored existing literature focused on staff wellbeing and identified lots of ideas and theories of what needs to be done. There is a significant gap in the provision of practical and clear guidelines on how to improve staff wellbeing and case studies that show VPs can both look after staff and be profitable in the New Zealand context. In this chapter, I describe the methodology that will allow me to identify and comprehensively analyse a set of case studies in the New Zealand context, and produce a set of guidelines on how to approach a focus on staff wellbeing with the aim of driving change in the sector.

7.1 Overall Research Methodology

The overall methodology used for this study is defined as Action Research (Dudovskiy, J. (n.d.)) as shown in Figure 2. Each phase of the research required identification of the focus, planning, data collection, analysis of the data and reflection which then led to refining the focus and plan for the next phase of the research. As each cycle of action research was concluded, some learning was able to be shared with workplace and industry colleagues.



Figure 2 Action Research Applied to this Study (developed by author)

A mixed method approach was used to collect data, including interviews, surveys, and focus groups. Interviews were used when an overview was required from a single person. Surveys were used when individual opinions were needed from larger numbers of people and focus groups were used to drill further down with selected case studies. Cross case analysis was performed to identify themes. This mixed methodology enabled me to obtain quality data, to select the right VPs as case studies, and to close the loop between the employer, employees, and client interpretations and consequently enabled strong conclusions to be drawn from this research.

Ethics approval and each research phase and corresponding cycle of the action research is described within this methodology chapter.

7.2 Ethics Approval and KTO Consultation

Interacting with employers and employees and asking for information, which if shared inappropriately could present a risk to the employer, employee, or business, required a category A ethics application. The research required collection of potentially sensitive information relating to staff and any findings, particularly if not positive, could potentially negatively impact the business or individuals. The overall risk was lowered somewhat in that I was seeking VPs who felt they were leading in the space of staff wellbeing. However, there was the risk that self-nominated VPs might think they are doing well from a manager/employer perspective, but this view may not be shared by the staff. To mitigate these risks, all data is stored safely and presented anonymously.

Kaitohutohu office (KTO) consultation was sought prior to submitting my ethics application. It is known that the number of Māori in this profession, both veterinarians and support staff, is low. This consultation with KTO helped me identify that findings from this research could result in a more culturally inclusive and safe environment which might be more appealing in the future to Māori career seekers. This did not result in any change of method for this study as the aim was to identify existing VPs that were performing well. However, this insight is interesting to consider as the industry grapples with limited diversity, and the potential that the findings in this study, if implemented widely may increase the appeal of the profession.

As the research was concluding, COVID-19 forced New Zealand into lockdown. This presented as an opportunity to find out how the case studies fared in a crisis and determine whether a staff wellbeing focus helped VPs getting through the crisis. Additional ethics approval was required to enable me to complete this additional part of the study.

The following supporting documents can be found in Appendix 3:

- [KTO consultation.](#)
- [Response from KTO.](#)
- [Initial Ethics application.](#)
- [Ethics Committee feedback.](#)
- [Ethics committee approval letter.](#)
- [Ethics application amendment request.](#)
- [Approval letter for amendments.](#)

7.3 Research Phases and Data Collection Methods

This research involved connecting with VPs that demonstrate a commitment and success when it comes to staff wellbeing. This includes collecting insight from employers and employees, as well as their clients. To ensure selection of case studies that met the brief, I set up a phased project. The phases, method of data analysis and rationale are summarised in Table 1. The first three phases were focused on identifying suitable VPs to be the in-depth case studies and the second three phases were designed to collect more detailed information from the in-depth cases studies and draw conclusions about what contributes to their success.

Table 1: Summary of the Research Phases

*These research phases were undertaken over a period of approximately 8 months.

Phase*	Research method	Brief Details	Practice time commitment	Benefits to the participating practices
1	Identify Potential Veterinary Practices	Advertising, designed to reach a wide spectrum of veterinary practices (Appendix 4)	5-15mins for email and/or short phone call	Opportunity to help improve the wider profession's commitment to staff wellbeing
2	Employer Interviews	Background information about the practice and its drivers	1-1.5 hours for interview plus est. 30mins to check approved summary of information collected	Opportunity to help improve the wider profession's commitment to staff wellbeing and to reflect on their own practice
3	Work Environment Survey	Matching the employer information with responses of staff in terms of their wellbeing and what the practice is doing that is working for them	15 minutes per employee	Practice received full report of all data collected with suggestions for next steps
4	Focus Groups	Face to face with staff from selected case studies to further develop understanding of why the practice is successful	1-1.5 hours per practice	Food and a time to connect and celebrate success A summary of information collected
5	Client Survey	To close the loop by confirming client satisfaction	Max 1 hour to circulate to clients. 2 minutes for a client to complete.	Data was anonymously collated and made available to practice for their own use.
6	COVID19 Resilience Questions	Interview with veterinary practice to understand COVID19 response.	15 minutes - 1 hour from employer/practice manager of case studies to record experiences	Contributing to industry resilience by sharing their insights

7.3.1 Phase 1: Identifying Veterinary Practices to Participate

I was looking for VPs that felt they fitted the brief of a VP that is demonstrating excellent socially sustainable ideals within a successful veterinary business context. Therefore, making a request to industry businesses to self-select was an appropriate method of identifying participants.

Utilising the NZ Veterinary Association's (NZVA) flagship magazine, VetScript, a request was made to VPs who thought they may be suitable for this study ([Appendix 4.1](#)). This publication reaches approximately 80% of the profession.

Once this magazine had been delivered to NZVA members, the request was published on the [WIVES \(Women in Veterinary | Essential Solutions\) Facebook page](#), which is very active, especially with veterinary professionals wanting to activate change. This post gathered interest and dialogue from some veterinarians wanting to be sure that the research involved talking to employees as well as employers as they were concerned that their employer and employee feedback may vary within a practice ([Appendix 4.2](#)).

I spoke with each VP that responded and explained what was involved. If they were still committed, I progressed them to the next stage. I then looked at the ownership structures and undertook to directly contact VPs to bridge the gaps as I felt it was important to try and get a cross section of these ownership structures.

7.3.2 Phase 2: Employer (or Veterinary Practice Manager) Interviews

Employer (or VP manager) interviews were undertaken with seven of the eight VPs that expressed an interest in participating, the eighth VP withdrawing before the employer interview took place citing lack of time (Table 2). These were completed via a telephone interview, or face to face if the VP was in a similar locality to me, at a mutually agreeable time. The purpose was to gather background information about the VP and the initiatives that support staff wellbeing.

Signed consent was returned by each VP prior to completion of the interview. Following the completion of the interview, typed notes were sent to the VP to ensure that they were an accurate representation of our conversation.

While some questions asked for hard data (for example hours of operation and ownership structure), some questions were open to personal interpretation of the owner/manager (for example communication quality and leadership styles). See [Appendix 5.1](#) for the specific questions asked in the employer interviews.

In summary, the initial questions in the employer interview included data to understand the basic VP demographics, including:

- species focus.
- ownership structure.
- staff demographics including gender, ethnicity, and qualifications.
- hours of operation.

The questions then expanded into areas that, based on my review of literature, are important to staff wellbeing, including:

- vision and values.
- staff ratios.
- staff turnover
- self-analysis of leadership style and expectations of others in the VP with leadership roles.
- rostering.
- overtime and after-hours expectations.
- staff leave and benefits.
- career planning for individuals within the VP including performance review and professional development.
- healthy and safety.
- VP culture.
- workplace stress management.
- Communication.
- assessment of commitment to sustainable practice – community and environmental.

The interview questions concluded with an assessment of the current VP success in terms of turnover and profit relative to budget. The employer interview data was examined by:

1. confirming that the information provided fitted the brief of a focus on staff wellbeing while being financially viable.
2. comparative analysis between case study VPs.
3. a cross check between what the employer reported in the interviews and what staff reported in the work environment survey when that had been completed.

This analysis is presented and discussed in more detail in the findings section and appendices.

7.3.3 Phase 3: Work Environment Survey

I created a work environment survey (WES) which was administered using Qualtrics. All seven VPs that completed the employer interview were progressed to this phase. The first question gave participants information on the project and required them to consent. Participants could only continue with the survey if consent was granted by the respondent. Participants were advised that the survey would be summarised for their employer but that all data would be anonymised.

Each VP had a unique survey URL, and this was circulated to all staff by the VP owner/manager.

The questions in the WES were designed based on the same research that informed the employer/VP manager interview questions and related to the same topics.

This data was analysed by comparing the agree and disagree data for each VP side by side. This is presented in detail in the findings section and in appendices.

7.3.4 Phase 4: Focus Groups

Three case studies were selected to participate in focus groups to develop an understanding of their success in more depth. These were chosen based on analysis of WES data presented in the findings section. The three highest scoring VPs were chosen.

The purpose of the focus groups was to gain further insights into how the VP is achieving success in staff wellbeing. They also provided an opportunity to discuss veterinary industry challenges that, despite the high staff wellbeing reported, were still challenges for the case studies.

Focus groups were held in January and February 2020. They were scheduled for one hour. All staff were invited and most attended. Catering was provided appropriate to the timing of the meeting. Day and time were selected by the VP to best suit their availability.

Case study A and B focus groups were completed in one session each, case study C was completed over two sessions to enable the whole team the opportunity to attend. Participants signed a consent form prior to the sessions starting.

Each session started with a brief overview of the WES results as a refresher and a way of focussing the discussion. Using guiding questions, I asked for feedback on the data presented specific to the VP and then on veterinary industry challenges.

Specific practice WES feedback guiding questions included:

- was the summary accurate?
- what else would you add to it?
- would you take anything away?
- what are the key areas that make this practice a great place to work?
- what are the key changes needed to further improve it?
- how should change be implemented?

Industry wide discussions included:

- leadership and its contribution to workplace success.
- veterinary industry pay rates.
- charging for services.
- attitudes to discounting and undervaluing services.
- attitudes to having students in practice.

Notes were handwritten during each focus group. Immediately after the focus groups the handwritten notes were typed up while the conversation was still fresh. The notes were then sent back to the VP to get confirmation that it captured the conversation accurately. Cross case thematic analysis was then used to present this data and compare each of the case studies.

7.3.5 Phase 5: Client Feedback

As VPs are in the service industry, it was important to show that the selected case studies had satisfied clientele. This was achieved using both publicly available data such as Facebook and Google reviews and two of the selected case studies also participated in a short customer satisfaction survey that I developed.

The questions in the survey were:

1. Overall, how satisfied are you with the service you receive from “name of VP” (5-point satisfaction scale).
2. In your opinion what is the best thing about “name of VP” (comments box).
3. In your opinion what is one thing you would like to see improved about “name of VP” (comments box).

For the purposes of this research the percentage satisfied was what was important, however the additional questions allowed thematic analysis to get a sense of what was working well, and areas of potential weakness from a client perspective. This also enabled me to provide a comprehensive report to each of the case studies for their use in further developing their business.

7.3.6 Phase 6: COVID-19 Business Resilience Questions

Phases 1-5 were concluding as COVID-19 was taking hold in NZ. Given the unique situation presented, I was interested to find out whether these high performing teams demonstrated resilience. This was my only deviation from the original agreed project.

Because relationships were already established with the three case studies, this created an opportunity, once we returned to level one, to understand the effects of COVID-19 on the VPs during and as we moved out of the crisis. Additional ethics approval was obtained to ask these additional questions as it was not included in the initial application ([Appendix 3](#)).

The themes the case study owners or practice managers were asked to comment on were:

- VP strategy to approaching the crisis.
- revenue impacts now and potentially long term and any financial assistance accessed (in broad terms – no figures required).
- staffing management/impacts on staff.
- health and safety challenges.
- changes that you have implemented now that might be used long term – e.g. more tele/video appointments in specific situations.
- client responses to the necessary changes.
- assessment on how well the business and staff have managed.
- any other insights you would like to share.

Analysis was by contrasting the responses to each question across the three case studies, looking for similarities and differences in approach.

7.4 Summary

In this chapter I have explained the phases of this action research, the rationale for each phase and the methodology used for collecting and analysing the findings. The result is a study that collects data from a variety of viewpoints and through both sequential and cross-case comparative thematic analysis allows strong conclusions to be drawn. In the next chapter I will present the findings and subsequent analysis.

8. Findings

In the previous chapter I explained the phases of the research and the rationale behind each phase. In this chapter I will present my findings at each stage, associated data analysis and some discussion about the findings so far for each phase of the research. As I progress through the phases I look at the growing body of data to draw stronger conclusions.

8.1 Identification of Veterinary Practices to Participate

Seven VPs came forward to participate in the study (six via the VetScript publication and one via the WIVES Facebook page).

A summary of the VP type and ownership of the initial practices wishing to participate can be found in [Appendix 4.3](#).

A gap in the corporate ownership structure was identified and I felt it was important to at least try and get a cross section of business ownership models. This led to direct communication via email, or a web enquiry where an email address could not be located, to five corporate groups operating in NZ, asking them if they were interested in nominating 1 or more branches to participate. Only one corporate group responded to the request. They were very helpful, keen to be involved and identified three of their VPs for me to directly contact. Of these, one was willing to participate and became the 8th participating VP while the other two identified that they did not have time to participate. I was disappointed, but not surprised that no corporates came forward. I had hoped that they would back themselves in this space. As numbers of corporate VPs grow year on year and therefore more of our industry colleagues end up working for them, it is important that staff wellbeing be a matter of priority.

Table 2 provides a summary of the VPs that agreed to participate and the phases they participated in.

Table 2: Summary of the Participation of the Eight Veterinary Practices Agreeing to be Part of the Study.

Note that these are not recorded in order of contact, but were reordered for ease of data presentation moving forward

	Location	Practice type	Ownership	Phases they participated in
A	Large City	Companion Animal Practice	Privately owned by 2 female veterinarians	Participated in employer interview and work environment survey, then selected as a case study. Participated in focus group, client survey and additional questions regarding COVID19
B	Small City	Companion Animal Practice	Privately owned by 1 female veterinarian and 1 female non veterinary practice manager	
C	Medium sized urban town	Large mixed practice (majority companion)	Privately owned by 2 male veterinarians	
D	Rural service town	Large mixed practice (majority dairy)	Club practice	Participated in employer interview and work environment survey. Only 50% staff participation in work environment survey. Not selected as a case study for phase 4
E	Satellite town of large city	Small but fast-growing companion animal practice	Privately owned by 1 female veterinarian and her non veterinarian husband	Participated in employer interview and work environment survey. Had good participation in work environment survey. Not selected as a case study for phase 4
F	Large city	Companion Animal practice	Corporately owned	Agreed to participate after direct contact was made, following nomination by corporate owner Participated in employer interview and work environment survey. Had good participation in work environment survey. Not selected as a case study for phase 4
G	Large city	Companion animal referral practice	Privately owned by veterinary husband and wife team	Participated in employer interview but was unable to engage participation of employees in the work environment survey so withdrew from study
H	Large city	Companion Animal Practice	Privately owned by 2 female veterinarians	Initially agreed to participate, but pulled out before the employer interview due to lack of time available to commit to participation

In summary, most VPs putting themselves forward were privately owned (six of eight) and of these, the balance was tipped towards female ownership. As well as the two corporate branches I talked to that cited lack of time to participate, one of the initial eight VPs agreeing to participate withdrew prior to the employer interview, also citing lack of time.

Although the research had not technically started at this stage, the response received did lead me to ask some questions.

1. Is a VP, that believes they are performing well in terms of social sustainability, doing well in this space if they are unable to spare approximately 2.5 hours over 6-8 months to contribute to the wider profession's wellbeing?
2. Why did the corporates not respond at all to the initial call for participants, and then the majority not respond to the direct contact made with them via their national offices?
 - a. In terms of the initial advertisement - did branches think they had to wait for their corporate owner to come forward and the corporate owners think the individual branches would respond? If this is the case, then this is suggestive of a lack of clear communication and may be indicative of wider communication challenges.
 - b. Are the corporate VP owners/VP managers not NZVA members or active on the social media channels used?
 - c. Why did 4/5 head offices not respond to the direct communication? Perhaps those filtering the emails felt that the project was not relevant.
 - d. Is this ownership structure not currently performing in both a socially and financially sustainable way at the coalface and thus it was deliberate choice to not take part in this research?
3. Are females more willing to put themselves forward to participate in social research as suggested by some research (Smith 2008) or is the leadership required for socially sustainable business a more natural female leadership style (Eagly and Carli 2003)?
4. Did imposter syndrome (Gardner 2016) or tall poppy syndrome (Kirkwood 2007) stop more VPs from coming forward, or are there genuinely very few who are focussed on the wellbeing of staff?

While these questions are interesting to ponder, direct answers were not sought to these questions in the subsequent research. This study was focussed on working with willing participants to showcase good practices and encourage change rather than finding out why people do not do things.

Now that I had a set of VPs with a variety of ownership models the next stage was to interview the practice owners or manager/s to find out more about their VP and the wellbeing ethos. In the next section I will discuss these interviews.

8.2 Employer Interview Findings

It was unsurprising that the information provided by the employer/managers of the VPs putting themselves forward for this research outlined many positive aspects of the VP and their perception on how they thought things were going. All were equally enthusiastic about what they were doing in their respective VPs and their wellbeing focus.

The interview provided some overall context for the veterinary practice and then some specifics about how they do things. Of interest to note is:

- the benefits over and above salary varied considerably at each practice.
- veterinarian to support staff ratios are between 1:2 and 1:3.
- all the participating practices reported meeting or exceeding their business financial goals.
- all the participants reported that their attention to staff wellbeing was high.

[Appendix 5.2](#) provides more detailed discussion on the key findings.

[Appendix 5.3 – 5.8](#) provide summary tables of key information provided from the employer interviews. They also include some notes regarding my initial impressions of the practice from the conversation as well as some potential challenges I identified. As case study G did not go on to complete the work environment survey, I have omitted the employer interview data. It is of interest to highlight three additional themes from the employer interviews based on these tables.

1. Overall, the case studies all spoke about the veterinary team and that included all staff. They avoided the “us” (the veterinarians) and “them” (the support staff) language implied in much of the research cited earlier.
2. All the case studies identified themselves as learning VPs and as such expected staff to be learning all the time and developing their skills. In addition, they all welcome students into their VPs and find them a valuable addition to the practice.
3. Low staff turnover is also a feature across all but one of the case studies, and where there was turnover it usually related to maternity leave, staff heading on their “OE’s” (overseas experiences) and VP growth. Gallup research (2008) has linked 75% of staff turnover to “bad bosses” which affects staff wellbeing. The measure of low staff turnover is an important one when considering staff wellbeing.

These interviews indicate that while there are themes across the case studies, these VPs are not “the same”. That reaffirms my thought process that there is not a cookie cutter approach to VP nor to wellbeing within it. What will emerge from this study are themes and areas of focus, not recipes for success.

The perceptions of employees can differ from that of the owner/VP practice manager so one of the keys to showing success in staff wellbeing will be congruence between the information provided by the VP employer/manager and the employee data collected through the work environment survey. The VPs all met the criteria of a focus on staff wellbeing while being financially sustainable to continue to the next stage of the WES. The WES allowed me to examine congruence between employer perceptions and that of the employees. In the next section I will examine the WES findings.

8.3 Work Environment Survey (WES) Findings

All the VPs completing the employer/VP manager interview, were then given the opportunity to engage with the WES as they met the criteria relating to financial wellbeing and focus on staff wellbeing. Both employees and employers were encouraged to complete the WES.

The WES was launched for seven VPs (Table 2; case studies A-G). Case study G withdrew after being able to engage only a few of their staff in completing the survey. All the practices that completed the WES had between 85 and 100% participation except case study D ([refer Appendix 6a.1.1](#)).

The WES survey collected data on the demographics of respondents. As well as getting a picture of the practice make up and diversity, demographic data was collected so that it would be possible to subgroup data and look at it from different perspectives, for example – veterinarians versus support staff or those newer to the profession and/or the practice versus those who have been there a while. The demographic data collected shows the practices as typical of VP in New Zealand. [Refer to Appendix 6a.1.2 – 6a.1.6 for more details about the demographics and graphs.](#)

[Appendix 6a.2 – 6a.11](#) outlines some key findings in the WES in relation to:

- vision and values.
- workhours and expectations.
- staff leave and benefits.
- health and safety.
- performance reviews, professional development, and career pathways.
- communication.
- wellbeing.
- position description, utilisation, and staff ratios.
- sustainable practices.
- leadership.

From the literature I know that it is essential that the VP is performing in all these areas to optimise staff wellbeing.

A summary report of the WES data, specific to the VP was provided to each participating practice. The VPs appreciated the reports, however their responses to them varied which gives insights into how each of the VPs handles feedback:

- Case studies A, B and C were very enthusiastic and excited about the value of the data to help them continue their journey.
- Case studies D and F were surprised about the findings and what they thought they were achieving was not universally being felt by the staff. However, they had a positive attitude to the value of the data in helping them progress forward.
- Case study E which also had disparity between the employer's views and those of the staff, responded by asking me not to circulate it to any of the staff.

In summary, the WES provided a huge body of data. Each of the six VPs had areas of relative strength compared to the others, and areas of weakness, which have been considered in this section. Based on the data so far, case studies A, B, C and D appear to be the ones performing most strongly in staff wellbeing, but the lower level of engagement in the WES for case study D is of concern in terms of progression to focus groups.

In the next section I will analyse quantitatively the data returned to select the case studies to progress to focus groups.

8.4 In-Depth Case Study Selection

In the previous section I outlined the findings from the WES. In this section I will show how I quantitatively analysed the data from the WES, to confirm selected case studies to continue with focus groups.

Following the employer interviews and WES, I identified case studies A, B and C as having solid frameworks in place and a track record of being focussed on staff wellbeing. Case study D is close, but engagement in the WES was of a concern in terms of whole team engagement.

I collated the data in each section (all questions in the section) by adding up the percentage for each response in each question to give a total score for the combined agree data and for the strongly agree data only. From here I ranked the case studies in each section¹. [Refer to Appendix 7 for calculations and notes on the calculations.](#)

In summary, case studies A, B, C and D scored the highest rankings overall when considering the combined agree data. When considering the strongly agree data only, then it is case studies A, B and C that stand out. Case studies A, B and C also had high participation rates in the WES ranging from 85% - 100%, whereas case study D only had a participation rate of 47%. This low rate of participation, despite numerous extensions and reminders from the executive manager means that the data may not be as good a representation of this VP.

While all six of the VPs completing the WES had their own individual strengths, considering both my overall impressions and the data presented above, case studies A, B and C were selected to progress to the focus group stage where I had the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding for the VPs and their teams. These case studies selected for in-depth analysis did not have the range of ownership structures I had hoped for; however, this is suggestive that at the current time, privately owned practices are leading the way in staff wellbeing.

In the next section I will analyse the findings from the focus groups.

8.5 Focus Group Findings

In the previous section I demonstrated how the three in-depth case studies were selected for focus groups. In this section I will discuss the findings from the focus groups and how these build on the previous findings.

Although guiding questions were provided (refer methodology section), the focus groups were set out to allow free flow of conversation and therefore the direction of the conversation varied with the VP.

It should also be noted that even though these in-depth case studies are already performing highly on staff wellbeing, often the conversation went to the small things that dropped their ratings, where they could see further opportunity to improve. This gave me the impression that these VPs were focussed on a continual improvement journey. They really wanted to be sure that they understood the issues that were raised so they could keep improving. Full summaries for each focus group can be found in [Appendix 8.1 – 8.3](#).

The discussions at each of the focus group were then collated into themes for comparison between the in-depth case studies. Copies of the thematic analysis tables for each of the themes summarised below can be found in [Appendix 8.4](#).

8.5.1 First Impressions on Arrival at the Veterinary Clinic

Each VP undertook business in completely different buildings, in very different localities, servicing very different communities. I felt welcomed warmly into each of them.

The vibe of the teams within each VP was different, but they presented as equally passionate about their business/workplace and were proud to show it off and talk about it. This will have many factors, but as reported during the employer interviews all these teams employ carefully to find people that fit into their business values.

¹ The leadership data was omitted from the analysis to choose the case studies as it was not suitable to collate quantitatively for comparison. This data is of more use for later analysis when looking at the leadership styles that contribute to the success of each of the case studies.

8.5.2 What has been Happening Between Completion of the WES and the Focus Group

As noted in the WES section of this chapter, these VPs had positively responded to their WES feedback and looked to use it to address any areas that were not performing as strongly. During the focus groups the teams wanted to express how much they had done since the WES, how they felt that they had solved some of the issues raised in the feedback and what they were still working on. This provided further evidence that these teams were very focussed on continuing to improve.

It was also pointed out, that due to the 4-point scale used in the WES, when staff responded somewhat agree it often related to a single issue. This highlighted a potential problem with choosing a 4-point over a 6-point or 7-point Likert scale (Sauro 2010) and that the results may have been higher with a different scale. However, the scale served its purpose in that areas of concern were highlighted, and the VP could address them.

With regards to the vision and values, these were not discussed in the focus groups for case studies A and B, however it came up for case study C. The difference between case study A and B and that of C is that A and B already have very clear and concise vision and values that are easy for staff to recall and they are part of everyday language based on WES feedback and that from employers. Following the WES, case study C have begun a review of their vision and values.

8.5.3 Health and Safety

The focus group discussion with case study A clearly highlighted that a communication breakdown had occurred relating to a new VP policy, which affected the team responses in the health and safety section. They have subsequently instigated a 15-minute weekly health and safety meeting that has been a positive addition to the team. The safe team culture allows everyone to feel comfortable sharing in that forum, however it was acknowledged again that, due to the 4-day working week and part time employees, not all staff can attend. It was acknowledged that although there is a mechanism to contribute, it is not the same as being in attendance.

Case study C discussed the delayed response to fixing an item related to health and safety (broken hydraulic table) highlighting the need for not only a clear reporting system but a system that requires a commitment to action. It appeared from discussion that the staff all knew about the broken table, but no one had got around to getting it fixed. In the focus group there was no complaint about it not being fixed, just acknowledgement that there was not any process driving it to be fixed. This is an opportunity to ensure there is a clear reporting and action chain with expectations around resolving the action.

8.5.4 Communication

The annual strategic meeting that is inclusive of all staff was highlighted by employees at case study A as being a highly valued process. Ensuring the team is involved in setting the direction and contributing to decision making has a positive effect on staff engagement and their feeling of being able to influence the future direction of the VP. Involving all staff in strategic planning is known to help businesses make better decisions (Landry 2020).

Case study A also highlighted the pros and cons of part-time teams – that they are good for the staff but make communication more challenging. Rather than considering this a roadblock to allowing more part time and flexible teams, they said it highlighted the importance of clear and concise communication.

Finally, case study A discussed the need to refine communication to avoid information overload and ensure it was effective and engaged with. The staff proposed an internal focus group to work through this. This showed the team had a focus on problem solving, were engaged in being part of the solutions and that as a team they felt empowered to do this, rather than expecting the managers to solve the problem. It also showed that the management/leadership style were supportive of this.

The discussion with case study C regarding communication demonstrated again how people can see the world through a different lens. What appears clear to some people is not always clear to others and that it is important to reflect more deeply on why certain feedback was received. In the WES for case study C, a respondent indicated they did not know who to talk to about an issue. Others in the team seemed surprised about this and pointed to clear lines of reporting documented on the walls of the VP. We discussed the concept that what is first identified as the problem may not be the root of the problem. For example, perhaps it was not actually the 'who to talk to' but who they feel comfortable talking to, and this person may not be the person they are supposed to raise the issue with. The way different team members perceive and interpret things can vary depending on their own world view, so part of good communication is looking from another viewpoint (Roberts 2011), acknowledging these and working to create a common understanding. 'A cone in a box' is a useful model to explain this. Depending on what side of the box you are looking at you see a different shape in the box (Brown 2006).

8.5.5 Wellbeing

As previously noted, wellbeing is clearly linked to Section 36 of the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 (the Act). It was already clear from the employer interviews and the WES results that these three cases studies are committed to staff wellbeing.

The VP owner in case study A is really keen to see the industry step up in the wellbeing space and she had been looking into whether there was a specific level of compliance that was required to encourage those that operate at the compliance level to put more effort into wellbeing. Like all legislation, the Act itself is not prescriptive, so there is an opportunity here to create industry guidelines, in consultation with the regulating agency WorkSafe, from this research that set out minimum and recommended standards for staff wellbeing. This is discussed further in the discussion chapter and a draft set of standards is presented in [Appendix 12](#).

Case study B discussed the opportunities to show kindness and do the right thing, using examples of team decisions to offer discounts. This led me to rethink some preconceived ideas about discounting being bad and consider how discounting could be better managed to enable kindness to be shown without the business being unable to meet annual cost of living increments or indeed the ability to earn a decent wage. There is an opportunity to show, in a planned way, openly and transparently, without negatively affecting the business, that the VP does care and has the option to show kindness in specific circumstances. This has been identified as a future research opportunity to model and test this concept ([refer to Appendix 14.8](#)).

Case study C showed how a cohesive team can work together and come up with good solutions. During the focus group they collectively agreed some new ways of working to make it acceptable to take a short break and regroup when things were stressful and to implement nurse triaging of animal patients. These are solutions already actively in place with case study A and working well. This also highlights an opportunity to create a community of practice with like-minded VPs to share ideas and perhaps just as importantly share successful implementation as often success is in the implementation (Millen et al 2002). An active community of practice could help accelerate change in this space.

The teams in the case studies all acknowledged that they check in on each other and that it is ok for a team member to acknowledge that they are having a bad day and to talk about it. The teams in these case studies have events that they contribute to annually as a team. These vary between the VPs, but examples include a community spey day² and a winter cooking competition. These are important for helping the team connect with each other and getting to know each other better.

² The VP offering free or significantly discounted desexing operations for cats and dogs that are strays or whose owners would otherwise be unable to afford the surgery.

8.5.6 Team Culture and Fit

All three case studies demonstrate strong VP culture and place importance on team fit when recruiting. It is interesting to consider whether team fit means “sameness” or there is a recognition that it is about fitting the team values.

In the discussion with case study C they noted that most of the team were in the same Myers Briggs quadrant (The Myers Briggs Foundation). Staff at case study C, viewed the results with interest and as a way to open their minds to the fact there may be other ways of looking at things which is a healthy attitude which is only likely to be seen in a strong healthy team.

As a tool, Myers Briggs has lost some of its dominance in recent times and there are now other many ways of grouping “types” in teams such as:

- DOT’s which is a tool that is designed to give better understanding of your own communication styles and those of others.
- DiSC which focuses on personality and behavioural style (Lambert 2020).
- Belbin which focuses on team roles and the language of teams.

However, the key with using any of these tools is that they help you to recognise differences in team members, strengths to harness and weaknesses to work on and potential gaps in the way the team thinks and plan to develop skill in these areas and/or employ for these skills (as well as for the VP values).

In terms of employing for team fit, recent literature suggests employers should be employing on values that match the organisation and for diversity add, rather than culture fit (or sameness) (Shellenbarger 2019). This appears to be particularly important especially as teams grow. In the NZ veterinary profession, there is very limited diversity when it comes to ethnicity and a growing feminisation of the industry which potentially contributes to the risk of sameness.

Case study B discussed an interesting trend in their VP, where the team culture and values tended to attract staff who had been burnt elsewhere. These staff need some help regaining confidence, but it is something the practice pride themselves on, central to their core value of kindness.

In retrospect, some further discussion about what these VPs meant by team fit would be useful to understand if they are focussed more on values and ensuring a balanced team or on sameness. This could form the basis of further research looking at the makeup of high performing teams.

8.5.7 Position Description and Utilisation

Each of the case studies have varying attitudes to veterinary nursing qualifications, but at the same time allow them to do a full range of technical tasks. Differences in what the veterinary nurses do, does seem to vary based on their own confidence and the confidence of the veterinarian they are working with.

Case study B employs certificate qualified (equivalent of one-year full time training) veterinary nurses which was the standard needed to be a veterinary nurse up until 2016. Since 2016, a diploma qualification (two years fulltime training) has been considered the minimum training to be a veterinary nurse and for entry to the voluntary register, with those having one-year training considered veterinary nursing assistants. Discussion with case study B revealed that while they are not against upskilling their nurses this was not a primary consideration when employing. Case study A employs graduates with a minimum of diploma and case study C often employ AVP staff when they are still students but require them to keep working towards their diploma.

This opens an area for consideration about the qualification versus specific personal traits and what is more important when it comes to employment. According to Scott's Work Ready Plus Framework (2019), the role specific competencies are only 1/5th of being work ready. Conversations I have had with industry over the years have revealed that the role specific competencies are the least important to them as employers as they feel they can train their employees up in these whereas the capabilities around personal capabilities and interpersonal and cognitive ability could not be trained on the job. However, the depth of scientific knowledge installed in learners as students is important to connecting the technical tasks learnt on the job to the 'why'.

8.5.8 Staff Ratios

As outlined in table 3.2 in [Appendix 5.2.5](#), case study A operates with a ratio of veterinarians to support staff of 1:3, Case study B is a ratio of 1:2 and case study C is 3:7 during the busiest part of the day for companion animals and 1:1 for the large animal side of the practice.

These three in-depth case studies have different ratios of support staff to veterinarians, but the WES data reports similar results around the ratios being adequate and this was confirmed in the focus groups. This suggests that staff ratios are not a primary concern for staff wellbeing, though there is likely a minimum ratio for support staff to be able to be well utilised and therefore feel valued, and for the veterinarians to be able to focus on veterinary skills (e.g. 1:2 would be the absolute minimum to allow nurses to do the full scope of technical skills while the veterinarian focuses on their specific role which all of these case studies meet). Limited literature is available on ratios and optimising utilisation and outputs, suggesting there is a need for further business modelling to look at this in relation to both staff utilisation and business viability.

Case study A indicated during the focus group discussion that they are working towards further increasing the support staff to veterinarian ratios, and part of that plan included charging clearly for AVP time.

8.5.9 Sustainable Practices

The subject of community engagement and environmentally sustainable practices was not discussed at the focus groups for case study A or B. Both scored very highly and had 100% agreement for all questions in the WES. Case study B have also won awards in this space.

While there was high agreement regarding community engagement in the WES for case study C, both the owners and the staff acknowledged during the focus group that environmental sustainability is an area of opportunity they would like to explore. As well as being the right thing to do, there are marketing opportunities for any business actively engaging in making positive change. Business initiatives like this also have the potential to engage everyone, create a plan of action and allow someone in the VP to lead it.

Literature shows that both future employees and clients are making choices on which businesses to support based on their values and contributions to things like community and reducing environmental footprint and this can lead to improved financial outcomes (Shrivastava 1995).

8.5.10 Leadership

In all of these in-depth case studies the owners have a role on the floor in the VP. For case study B and C, they employ VP managers that allow the owners to continue with veterinary work. For case study A, each of the owners has a VP management release. While it was only expressed specifically by the staff in case study A, it was implicit in discussions with case study B and C that even though the VP could run successfully without the owners there, the intrinsic value of having the employer actually know what it is like on the floor was perceived to be very important.

The common themes that were congruent across each of these focus groups are:

- quality leadership is essential in VP success – they set the scene and the expectations but take the team for the ride and utilise their team’s knowledge and ideas to continue the business development.
- lead by example – they actively live by clear vision and values: they are walking the talk.
- employ collaborative leadership styles.
 - they are inclusive leaders that value the opinions of their team and include staff in decision making both day to day and strategically and operate on a continuous improvement model.
 - they understand that collaborative styles improve uptake of decisions and help the employer understand employee values and thus engage them.
- the leaders are still very much part of the team – it is not an us and them scenario.
- they are genuinely kind and caring.

What was observed at all three focus groups from the leaders when the staff spoke about them was their absolute humbleness and acknowledgement of and gratitude to their teams when praise was handed to them. There was no grandstanding or pedestal type behaviour.

What is not clear and would need further research is whether it is the actual presence of the person experiencing day to day on the floor or is it a trait like empathy that is the key.

8.5.11 Charging

All of these in-depth case studies are meeting or exceeding their current business profitability goals, so their current business model is working for them, however, the three in depth case studies have very different thought processes around the question of charging for services and discounting.

Case study A was the most progressive in creating some clarity around AVPs being fee generating, rather than treating them as overheads. They have introduced a plan to increase AVP wages as they start generating income. It would have been interesting to have representatives from each of these in-depth case studies in the same room discussing this topic to see what developed from a conversation.

The industry mantra is that veterinarians should not discount services, yet discounting is widespread and often so hidden that clients do not even know when they are getting a discount. For example, desexing is heavily discounted and if clients are not aware of this it sets a precedent for what surgery should cost. In some cases veterinarians may decide to reduce the surgery time because they decided they took too long, and not acknowledge it on the invoice as a discount or omit to charge theatre fees to cover the cleaning and maintenance for example. Case study B suggests that as an industry the mantra of “stop all discounting” should be reviewed, as the ability to give a discount is a feel-good factor for caring staff. On reflection, I propose that the industry should always outline the full cost of any procedure, regardless of what discount they may apply later, clearly account for discounting (e.g. desexing or reducing actual surgery time in the charges, discounting hospital fees), budgeting for a certain amount of discounting in a year to apply to specific cases (agreed criteria), and always using a discount code to be able to account for it and check it is on budget. This approach should be clear to clients (actively showing care for the community). Further research is needed into discounting models specific to the veterinary profession.

8.5.12 Remuneration

These three in depth case studies reported good wellbeing data, but are still affected by this industry wide issue or poor remuneration, as shown in the WES data where much higher numbers of staff reported that they did not feel their remuneration was meeting their needs. This includes both veterinarians and support staff. In the first instance this suggests that you can have high wellbeing without addressing this issue up front, although Herzberg Hygiene theory would suggest it should be dealt with (refer to the discussion chapter (9.3)).

Case study A had the lowest agreement rating to the question relating to financial needs being met (located in an area of high living costs), however they also have the clearest plan to address this industry issue, through charging for AVPs. The staff in case study A also identified that while they could earn more in another industry, the quality of their current workplace is worth more than the dollars alone, although there is a minimum they need to survive. This was reiterated by staff at case study C too.

When each focus group discussed this subject in relation to the whole industry and how to solve it, there were markedly different responses ([refer to Appendix 8.4.15 and 8.4.16](#)) – this could indicate there are many ways to reach a solution, or that there is a lack of understanding in the industry on how to make wholesale change. This discussion circled back to the charging and discounting discussions and are all tied closely together and should be a priority for further research ([Appendix 14.6 – 14.9](#)).

8.5.13 Ownership Structures

Case study C shared some very thoughtful insights into the value of retaining individual VP ownership and flavour created by that to service its own community while collaborating as a group of individual VPs working together to solve problems, share resources such as HR support, professional development and buying power. They believe that while corporate ownership has advantages in terms of buying power and standardisation, there appears to be a risk of losing that responsiveness to local community needs and that personal connection with clients due to the potential that you feel you have less input and influence in the business. Perhaps the model case study C operate under offers an insight into the best of both worlds.

Based on previous data collected, case study B is a fast-growing VP and it was intimated that the VP values, that are being actively lived, are one of the reasons why clients are shifting from nearby corporates to them.

Referring to the beginning of this research, it was also incredibly hard to get any response from corporates to engage with this project. More work needs to be done to understand what the reasoning for that was and how this all links together.

8.5.14 Students on Work Placement

My experience working in education highlights the very different experiences students get from different VPs work placements. The three in depth case studies all expressed how much they value having students, some students even got included in the focus groups. Lambert (2020) discussed the importance of having a welcoming environment for students, having a plan for integrating them into the team while they are on placement and promoting them as part of growing successful and engaged teams.

This leads to the suggestion that VPs with high staff wellbeing are in a better position to welcome students. When VPs are not well, staff are struggling to look after their own needs so struggle to welcome others onto the team to learn.

There is an opportunity for the education sector to support VPs with a clear framework for supporting VPs to embrace students. This could be a collaborative project with industry.

8.5.15 Focus Group Summary

In summary, the focus groups allowed the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of each of the case studies and observe the teams interacting together. It was also an opportunity to discuss further their successes as a team and to discuss ideas for solving some of the industry issues.

In the next section I will use client feedback to close the loop, linking these in-depth focus case studies that demonstrate high staff wellbeing to satisfied clients.

8.6 Client Feedback Findings

Following the completion of data collection from the VP employers and employees (through the employer interviews, WES and focus groups) this section will summarise the findings from the client feedback. The purpose of collecting this feedback was to close the loop, having already demonstrated high staff wellbeing and VP profitability, it was important to demonstrate that the customers are happy too. Data was collected through a client survey as well as reviewing online feedback available in the public arena through Facebook and google reviews. [Refer to Appendix 9](#) for details specific to each case study and associated data.

In summary, employee satisfaction and wellbeing are linked to customer satisfaction (Prossack 2019). This research has not set out to prove this point, however this data was collected to show that these VPs with high staff wellbeing are performing well in terms of client satisfaction in addition to meeting their financial goals (table 3.4). While more analysis of this data could be undertaken, for the purposes of this case study, the data collected indicates the presence of high client satisfaction for each of the case studies. The data collected from the client survey was provided to each of the case studies, and they are using it to further improve their service.

In the next section I will review the feedback provided from the case studies regarding their experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown period to examine the resilience of these case studies.

8.7 COVID-19 Resilience Findings

In the previous sections I have completed the data collection which has resulted in three case studies which met the brief of achieving staff wellbeing in a financially profitable setting, with high client satisfaction. In this section I will examine how these healthy teams performed when thrust into a worldwide pandemic that required NZ to go into lockdown.

The COVID-19 pandemic was declared shortly after completing the case study focus groups. Each of the case studies were asked to give some feedback on their experience during COVID-19 to determine whether these strong teams would also thrive in a crisis.

The NZ government created a series of alert levels to move through during the COVID-19 Pandemic. These required varied levels of lockdown and contact restriction. During the whole period, veterinarians were classified as essential services, so even in full lockdown were able to continue offering emergency services, though clients could not be with their pets during consultations. However, the government were late to approve veterinarians as essential services and it took time to clarify exactly what they could and could not do at each stage. This required lots of planning and implementation in very short time frames which contributed to some stress for the VPs and the industry. However, the feedback from the case studies indicates the stress was well handled by the teams who, led by good leaders, just got on with it and rose to the challenge.

Individual responses from case studies can be found in [Appendix 10.1 – 10.8](#).

While all the in-depth case studies had different experiences, the following themes emerged:

1. All the VPs broke into 2 or 3 separate teams for the level 4 lockdown to ensure if someone on a team got sick it would not result in the whole team being quarantined and just got on with what was needed. How each case study managed these teams varied but a key was maintenance of communication between the teams.
2. Clear communication to clients was maintained so they knew what to expect and what was expected of them. This was believed to be a key focus and most clients responded well.
3. Each case study had variable drops in income (due to only being allowed to undertake emergency work during level 4) and variable utilisation of the wage subsidy but there were no redundancies (and this was very important to the case studies to avoid this if at all possible). A very short-term wage reduction for one VP was instigated. Each VP has experienced some bounce back post lockdown as the VPs catch up on deferred non-essential services.
4. While acknowledging it has been hard, all the case studies were positive about how the team and business managed during the pandemic and the future. The VPs all felt their teams really stepped up during the pandemic and the benefits of this are being felt in the post lockdown phase.

These were already strong, well-functioning teams, and this appears to have stood them in good stead through the pandemic and for moving forward. All the case studies are going to continue with some of the things they implemented during lock down.

Paul Ainsworth presented at the World Veterinary Congress 2020 during the height of the pandemic in May on champion teams. He stated that champion teams are agile, comfortable with conflict (i.e. conflict is a positive experience), focussed on seeking to improve and they are happy with no politics or internal conflicts. Ainsworth also stated that the pandemic caused teams to have to reform, as explained in the Tuckman model (Tuckman and Jensen 1977) which was first described in 1965 but is still used today to describe how groups form and reform. Based on the information provided by the three case studies, it appears these already strong performing teams moved quickly through the phases to reform as strong sub-teams working through the lockdown and the feedback indicates that the teams have quickly reformed into their full teams once restrictions were reduced and from that experience during lockdown they have developed and strengthened further.

8.8 Summary

In summary, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the data collected was indicating case studies A, B and C are strong teams that have excellent staff wellbeing, while having satisfied clients and being financially profitable. The information provided post lockdown suggests that these strong teams can weather unprecedented events well and emerge stronger than before. Further research would be needed to identify whether weaker teams were as successful.

In the next section I will summarise and discuss the core themes, identified by this study.

9. Discussion

In the previous section I outlined the findings at each phase of the research, with the last three phases focussing on the three selected case studies. In this section I will discuss and summarise the key findings.

This research showcases examples of three New Zealand VPs that are demonstrating high levels of staff wellbeing while meeting or exceeding their business goals and scoring high levels of customer satisfaction. These VPs also demonstrated resilience in the face of a pandemic.

The VPs have similarities with regards to overarching themes of how they operate, however these practices demonstrate that there is no cookie cutter recipe. Instead, there are overarching themes that could be applied to any VP, and it is likely they can be applied to any business. These themes are congruent with the published literature on this topic.

The discussion is divided up into themes to improve readability, however these are all interlinked.

9.1 Leadership

Ehara taku toa, he takitahi, he toa takitini

My success should not be bestowed onto me alone, as it was not individual success but success of a collective

Leadership is the first ingredient for a successful business and VPs are no different. Leaders empower the team to perform in line with the business vision and values and are key to a successful business. They lead by example and are genuinely kind and caring. The leaders in these case studies use a variety of mostly collaborative leadership styles, clearly understanding that these styles strengthen the team and help the employer better understand and engage with the team. There is high respect for formal leaders in all the case studies as demonstrated in the WES however they are viewed very much as part of the team. It was during the focus groups that it was possible to get a real sense of the leaders and how their teams viewed them. The staff acknowledged how important the leadership was to make the VP a great place to work. It was also possible to witness the humbleness of the leaders when they were openly praised by their team during each of these focus groups.

Tier (2006 and 2010), Sinek (2017) and Guesgen (2018) all showed that effective leadership from the VP manager (owner) is the key to getting a shift in the industry required to improve wellbeing of staff, longevity in VP, job satisfaction and business outcomes, further supporting the findings in this research.

Despite VP ownership still being majority male in New Zealand with majority female staff, most of the VPs that volunteered to be case studies in this research had female leadership. This raises the question that in our changing times, where we need to prioritise staff wellbeing and relationship centred care of clients and animals, whether there is a style of leadership that comes more naturally to females (Eagly and Carli 2003). That is not to say males can't lead effective healthy organisations where staff are well looked after (in fact case study C do just that), but that the trait to lead more collaboratively and kindly is more common (and more accepted by societal norms) in female leaders.

Often leadership is thought of in formal roles only. However, leadership can be a range of things. Giving people ownership of something in a team is good practice – whether it be formal or informal. Examples of informal leadership in a VP setting include audit and plan improvements to environmental sustainability, running clinical audits, and laboratory equipment maintenance. In addition, traditionally in the veterinary industry people have been promoted into leadership roles without any training. Identifying potential leaders early and training them (even if they eventually move to another VP to get the formal leadership role they desire) is good for staff development and for future industry leadership. Leadership training should thus be considered valuable professional development for all staff and roles should have a set of agreed and clear expectations and goals for the role.

9.2 Vision and Values

Ki te kahore he whakakitenga ka ngaro te iwi

Without foresight or vision the people will be lost

Successful VPs have a clear vision which cements the ‘why are we doing this’ (Sinek 2017). In addition, setting clear values that the VP lives by helps to build a strong team that works together to succeed, in meeting client expectations and improving animal welfare.

Many businesses have a published or implied vision and values. It would be hard to find a business where you could not see that these were well meaning. This was demonstrated in this research. All the case studies at interview stage had a vision and values. Most were written down, some of them were simpler than others and thus easier to remember but for case studies A and B they were clear, easy to remember and lived in everyday conversation. Case study C was on the journey to uncomplicate their vision and values and enable them to be clearly part of day to day conversation but still scored well on staff feeling that they knew these, and the VP lives them. The core of what the business is about needs to be central to every decision made – big or small.

9.3 Motivating Staff

The BVEA retention survey is a large British survey that collects data from across the veterinary sector in the UK, which has similar trends to those in New Zealand. The survey identified that for both veterinarians and veterinary nurses nearly 50% consider they will be looking for a new job within two years and the reasons for both leaving a job and staying in a job are the same. These are family, team and management.

Individual VPs cannot do much about choosing to move to be closer to family which was a big driver for changing jobs in this survey, but they can be influential over creating family friendly roles, the team and management by creating an environment where there is a strong, collegial team with collaborative leadership. As demonstrated in the in-depth case studies, successful VPs have low staff turnover.

Although first proposed in 1965 the Herzberg Hygiene theory is still believed to be relevant (Sachau 2007) and has an application here. This theory explains factors that motivate and the demotivate staff. The concept is to ensure that the demotivating factors are tidied up, and the motivation factors are enhanced

Demotivating factors include:

- poor working conditions – relating to for example space, warmth, enough time to do the work required, safety considerations, breaks, enough staff to get the job done to the highest standards.
- poor co-worker relations.
- lack of clear policies, rules, and expectations.
- ineffective leader/manager.
- unfair and/or unliveable base wage/salary.

The demotivating factors, except for the remuneration issue, have been addressed well in these case studies. They have quality leadership, strong teams, cover for staff when they are on leave, time for breaks (and make it not negotiable), divorcing clients³ and ensuring clear job descriptions and performance review process. Phelan (2009) describes the importance of setting a job description with clear expectations and providing feedback.

In terms of keeping staff motivated, motivating factors include:

- achievement.
- recognition.
- responsibility.
- the job itself.
- advancement.
- personal growth.

In the veterinary industry the job itself has a strong attraction for people – people that work in the industry really care about animals and their welfare, so the job itself is a very strong motivator.

These motivating factors have been addressed well in these case studies including: placing high value on support staff, creating roles that meet staff needs (e.g. more part time roles), visible acknowledgement of staff that go above and beyond, and although they haven't got this 100% right yet, they have a plan to link performance reviews to professional development plans to grow and develop staff and allow them to meet their career goals.

Staff wellbeing requires all the demotivating factors to be addressed. This should be a given in a well-functioning business. Then attention paid to the motivating factors. If the demotivating factors are dealt with the motivating factors will keep people in the business.

One area that is complex and is not addressed well in any of the case studies is wages/salary, which were largely reported to be not meeting needs. Kimber and Ratcliffe (2017) investigated why individuals stay in veterinary nursing and how they stay and manage to thrive when operating in high-demand, high-strain, dangerous and underpaid roles. They conclude that improving coping and communication strategies may encourage positive workplace behaviours and occupational commitment as well as reducing burnout and intentions to quit. This is congruent with discussions with the case studies where the veterinary nurses commented on the quality of the workplace contributing to them staying. This does not however justify wages that do not allow peoples basic needs to be met.

³ Clients are advised that they are no longer welcome at the practice if they are causing undue stress to staff. For example, they are disrespectful or unreasonable or difficult about paying account,

9.4 Staff turnover

All the case studies report low staff turnover. Low staff turnover provides team stability, is evidence of being a great place to work (staff are well looked after) and is a significant cost saving for the business in the long term. The cost of replacing staff is often underestimated by businesses, with experts estimating the cost to the business somewhere between one and a half to three times an annual salary (Twine et al 2011) – this is accounting for not only the costs of recruiting, but in training time (where one staff member is taken from their normal role to provide training), lost production (new staff member is slower), changes in team dynamics and the team takes time to reform and return to normal function and potential lost loyalty from clients, who dislike seeing someone different each time. High turnover is also seen as a warning sign for prospective employees of dysfunction. Over time high turnover could lead to reduced calibre of applicants for roles which will further cost the business.

9.5 Language

The three in-depth case studies highlighted in this study all use the term veterinary team and it is inclusive of all staff. The WES also showed that all the staff felt valued within these teams. The idea of the veterinary team (which includes veterinarians, veterinary nurses, veterinary nurse assistants, technicians, kennel hands, receptionists, VP managers and so on) needs to be explored.

A common piece of anecdotal feedback from VPs is that the veterinarians are treated better, and everyone else are second class citizens. This is suggestive of a power imbalance (real or perceived) which has the potential to impact on wellbeing which needs to be investigated. Regardless of whether it is unintended, language has a huge influence on perceived value, and in the case studies it was clear that the staff felt valued by being part of an inclusive team. I propose that VPs should ensure a whole team approach in the language and the way they solve problems, even when discussing treatment of cases as these case studies do.

9.6 Feedback

Obtaining feedback is essential in developing strong teams and businesses. It tends to be common for managers to give feedback to the staff they manage during performance review cycles but less common for a business to seek feedback from the team, that can be used to enhance the business. Johari's window (2014) is a useful model to explain why this is important. Feedback from the team shines a light in the blind spot. It can also test what you think you already know.

When comparing the employer interviews which included the employers view on the wellbeing in the VP and the WES, which looked at all the staff interpretation, several blind spots were identified. While there is congruence between the employer interview and the WES for the three in-depth case studies there is evidence of incongruence in the other three VPs that completed the WES, where they rated wellbeing and respect much lower than the employer did. Exposing this blind spot is a good exercise for businesses to undertake regularly.

Not only is it important to collect feedback, but it is also important to accept it, acknowledge it and use the information to move forward. This was very much how the three in-depth case studies reacted. They all took the feedback on board at the time, were grateful for it and set about using it to make immediate changes. This contrasted to the three case studies not selected where two of the three contacted me and suggested the feedback was not accurate, the third was surprised by the feedback and after some time reflecting, took it on board.

9.7 Health and Safety Focus including Personnel Wellbeing

Staff wellbeing is not only the right thing to do but is central to business success. Wellbeing should not be treated in isolation to the businesses vision and values, but if it is managed central to these, staff wellbeing leads to a reduced risk of business failure (Rickets and Marchant 2017).

In addition, regardless of whether a business driver is to do the right thing (exceed compliance) or compliance driven (meet the minimum standards set by law) staff wellbeing is a requirement of the Health and Safety at Work Act (2015) and needs to be a priority.

Understanding this fact, enables the conversation to move from “should we do this” or “do we have to do this”, to “how do we do it”. As well as previously cited articles relating to staff wellbeing challenges in this industry, a recent study by Moir and Van den Brink (2019) has highlighted the urgency of evaluating initiatives in the wellbeing space which this study undertakes to some extent. There is an opportunity for the industry to set up minimum and recommended standards, like the Codes of Welfare, based on the findings of this research. An initial draft is provided in [Appendix 12](#).

All the in-depth case studies operate in a space where all aspects of health and safety are valued, both physical and mental and all have wellbeing KPI's. For case study A and B, the VPs were founded with these in place. For case study C, they are at the beginning of the journey that has these KPI's front and centre. In the time that lapsed between the WES being completed and the focus group each case study had already worked on fixing any areas identified in the WES related to health and safety, even though they had high agreement scores in this area, suggesting a zero tolerance.

Some practices that the in-depth case studies have in common, which contribute towards meeting the obligations of the Health and Safety at Work Act (2015) with regards to section 36: Duty of Care. Some examples are provided in the list below.

1. Divorcing clients – the leadership take the stance that it is not acceptable for clients to treat their staff badly. The staff are valued more highly than a poorly behaving client.
2. Mental wellbeing being recognised as important and is supported. This includes:
 - a. encouraging the creation of space to breathe – e.g. “take 5” to gather yourself.
 - b. acknowledging industry issues and talking about them e.g. compassion fatigue, burnout.
 - c. access to an employee assistance programme.
3. When reviewing things that have gone wrong, the case studies review the process not the person. Language is important – as a team, where did it break down, how do we avoid it next time.
4. Promoting a culture of it being ok to report things/speak up. It is a legal requirement of the Act to be able to speak up and not have any negative effects. The in-depth case studies create the culture that makes staff feel safe to do this.
5. Enforcing breaks by creating a ritual to make it happen. These are also a legal requirement (2 x 10min breaks paid and 30min lunch break unpaid for shifts over 5.5 hours are a legal minimum) but as an industry not something that is universally practiced.

Weston summarises the lessons to be learned from a workshop on mental health issues in the veterinary profession (Weston 2017). It includes both personal factors and factors within the workplace that are important for good mental health. Although this article again focuses on veterinarians; veterinary nurses, technicians, and other allied veterinary professionals suffer from many of the same issues. Strategies for promoting wellbeing in this literature included:

- *developing a positive work environment.*
- *providing workplace support.*
- *balancing job demands with job control.*
- *developing leadership and management skills.*
- *appropriately rewarding employees' efforts.*

These factors could be considered implicit in each of the three in-depth case studies. “Appropriately rewarding employee's efforts” is open to some interpretation. This could equate to monetary value, but for many, as long as basic needs are met, it is about acknowledgement and being made to feel valued by being part of an inclusive team and being able to influence decisions and direction.

9.8 Strong, Diverse, and Communicative Teams

The in-depth case studies have strong teams that are working together towards the same goal. It is interesting at this point to highlight Lencioni's five dysfunctions of a team (2010). This theory uses Maslow's hierarchy which was first described in 1943 (Maslow 1943) but is still widely used today, applied to a dysfunctional team. Reversing these give you the five functions of a successful team, namely – trust, safe conflict, commitment, accountability, and attention to results. Brené Brown describes what trust is using the word “BRAVING” (boundaries, reliability, accountability, vault, integrity, non-judgement, generosity).

The in-depth case studies identified in this research are all examples of strong functional teams. The teams have respect and trust for each other, are collectively involved in sharing challenges, solutions and formal decision making. The staff in these teams feel safe to speak up when they do not feel something is right. For case study A they actively use the values of the VP to help with this. A staff member will say “are we living our value of “x” when we do this” which starts the conversation. The focus groups confirmed the importance of communication in strong teams, and this was highlighted as even more important when teams are part time or four-day a week teams, to ensure any decision-making is both collaborative, and disseminated across the team.

The in-depth case studies have examples of strong communication and collaboration as well as areas where work is still needed to further refine dissemination of decisions using methods that work best for all team members. Regular meetings and having a good atmosphere where communication and the raising of challenges was encouraged were key in these strong teams and many of the places where it felt could be connected to rushing. Making time to ensure communication is clear, transparent, and disseminated to the right people is important.

All the in-depth case studies have rigorous employment procedures and actively employ for team fit. They could all identify scenarios where the wrong employment decision has created challenges and experience has led to improved employment procedures. The wrong employment decision can have devastating effects on a team. Grant (2016) states: “*Let one taker into the team and the givers will stop giving. Keep the wrong people off the bus.*” This supports the importance of selecting the right person for a team.

There is however a difference between employing for team fit and “sameness” (Shellenbarger 2019). In an industry that still lacks diversity there is an inherent risk in this and it was demonstrated to some degree in case study C with the Myers Briggs data they shared. Employment decisions (and professional development decisions) are made on how the person will fit into the team, not just in terms of technical skills but more generic skills such as being a type of person that can fill gaps in the team that might be missing, for example, a gap in skill at leading projects, or finishing things.

This research has not set out to examine the pros and cons of recruiting techniques and how the team is constructed in terms of strengths and diversity. There could be an opportunity to examine these ideas in future work, as there is increasing dialogue coming out discussing recruitment bias and the risk of recruiting a team of similar people which could potentially limit innovation and growth (Shephard 2019).

9.9 Learning Focus

The in-depth cases studies all described themselves as having a culture of continuous improvement. This related not only to their staff and the learning journey they are on, but to welcoming in students, both veterinary and AVP students, to obtain practical hands on experience. During the focus groups, I encountered students at two of the case studies who were able to report on their experiences at the case studies and compare this to other experiences they have had. The clear message was that these VPs were excellent places for student learning and experience. They felt welcomed as part of the team and the VPs provided a nurturing environment where learning could occur. Many of the staff at case study C started as students and were employed during or at the end of their study. Case studies A and B also employed past students. The staff at the three practices also reflected on how much they liked to have students not only as they loved helping them learn, but also, that they learn from them.

My experience in the education sector is that access to placements and experiences with placements is very mixed. While there are a set of VPs that reflect the attitude of the case studies above, some VPs refuse to take students and others take students out of obligation and fail to provide quality environments for the student. One of the common pieces of feedback I hear from VPs about why they do not welcome students as easily is “why are you teaching the AVPs this – they are not mini veterinarians?”. This is indicative of a misunderstanding of the roles of AVPs and that of veterinarians and is an area that needs addressing in terms of role clarity and professional identity.

This leads to the following proposition: if a VP culture is healthy and people understand their roles, staff are happy. If the culture is not so healthy then it is harder to make space for students because staff are so busy just surviving. Applying that to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, in VPs where staff wellbeing is low, staff are operating at the levels of psychological and safety needs, and fighting for these to be met, and there is no room for students. Once a VP begins to operate further up Maslow’s hierarchy, the culture and wellbeing are in a space where staff can welcome learners into the space.

9.10 Resilience

Due to the worldwide COVID 19 pandemic which was declared just as the data collection was concluding, there was an opportunity to examine the resilience of these case studies that so far appeared to be healthy, high performing teams. Resilience is the ability to recover quickly from difficulties. While there was no doubt that each of the case studies had challenges during the pandemic lockdown, what is evident from the information provided by the VP owners/managers is that teams stepped up, navigated the challenges and have come through the lock down period in good shape. This can be attributed to the fact that the teams were in a strong position heading into the pandemic as they have good leadership and collective decision-making ability. As a team, they navigated and solved or managed the challenges as they arose. While all these VPs took varying degrees of financial hit, they managed to retain all their staff and are positive about the future. This contrasts with anecdotal reports from other VPs and employees within VPs that they did not cope well, and, in some cases, VPs laid off staff during the lockdown.

9.11 Summary

In this section I have outlined the similarities between the three in-depth case studies that correlate with the existing literature in terms of being essential for staff wellbeing and subsequent business success. In summary these similarities include:

- strong, clear, and concise vision and values which are referred to in everyday and strategic conversations.
- strong collaborative and kind leadership.
- measurable wellbeing KPI's.
- considering the team as a whole and avoid language that segregates the different team roles.
- highly functional teams that demonstrated resilience in an unprecedented crisis.
- a strong health and safety focus – both mental and physical aspects.
- clear position descriptions and career pathways.
- effective and positive communication.
- rosters that meet team needs.
- focus on continual learning for their staff and work placement students.

10. Conclusion

This study has shown that practices can have high staff wellbeing while still meeting their business financial goals. Whilst not yet fully addressing some of the industry wide issues, such as poor financial rewards for staff, there are some excellent examples of sustainable business practices. This study has identified that staff wellbeing must be a focus regardless of whether your driver is compliance or doing the right thing because it is part of the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015.

There is no set recipe for success – it is more of an art form. There are however some central concepts and making change will be good for your business. The key is to plan and deliberately integrate sustainable practices into the business and this requires quality collaborative leadership. The recommendations are found in the next chapter and in [Appendix 14](#) I have outlined my recommendations for further research.

11. Recommendations for Veterinary Workplaces

The time for change is now. Staff wellbeing is not an optional extra, it is required by law. However, it is not something that can be ticked off like meeting radiation safety standards. It requires a planned, integrated team approach and the right leadership style.

The recommendations for improving staff wellbeing, based on the findings of this study are listed below.

1. Start with vision and values – clear, concise, meaningful, and agreed on by the team. Make sure that they are such that everyone on the team can remember them and know what they mean. They need to be integrated into every conversation and decision made.
2. Obtain some leadership support such as mentoring or training, especially if collaborative and transformational leadership styles are not your natural style.
3. Measure your team's engagement and wellbeing regularly, starting with a baseline now.
4. Be open to the feedback – even if it is surprising, ask yourself what the feedback is telling you.
5. Agree as a team to KPI's with SMARTER goals – prioritise the quick wins first.
6. Involve the whole team in creating solutions for the areas identified in the engagement and wellbeing feedback.
7. Ensure that communication channels are suitable for the team and the specific message that need to be communicated and efficiently delivered.
8. Connect with other practices on the journey to support each other – the journey will be unique to each practice, but the themes will be common.
9. Commit to AVOIDING the following statements: "We want to make change but.....
 - a. at the end of the day it is a business.
 - b. at the end of the day we answer to the shareholders.
 - c. we just cannot do anything because the clients will not pay for it.
 - d. the issues are industry wide; we cannot change until the industry changes.

The journey to a happier, healthier, and more profitable profession begins today.

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13. Appendices

This is a revised copy of this thesis, focussed just on the research. The professional practice aspect of my final thesis has been omitted in this version. Therefore, some Appendices (1, 2, 6b, 11 and 13) are not included in this version.

All of the appendices can be accessed by [clicking on the Google Drive folder link](#).

15.1 Appendix 3 – Ethics Approval

Contains:

- 3.1 KTO office consultation
- 3.2 Response from KTO office
- 3.3 Ethics Application
- 3.4 Ethics Application Feedback
- 3.5 Approval for initial project
- 3.6 Ethics application amendment to include COVID questions
- 3.7 Approval for additional questions relating to COVID-19

15.2 Appendix 4 – Identification of Veterinary Practices to Participate

Contains:

- 4.1 Advertisement published in VetScript, July 2019
- 4.2 Interaction on the WIVES Facebook page
- 4.3 Practice types and ownership structures of the self-nominated practices

15.5 Appendix 5 - Employer Interview

Contains:

- 5.1 Employer interview guiding questions
- 5.2 Key findings from employer interviews
 - 5.2.1 After-hours
 - 5.2.2 Work hours
 - 5.2.3 Financial rewards
 - 5.2.4 Staff benefits
 - 5.2.5 Veterinarian to support staff ratios
 - 5.2.6 Assessment of Performance – Social, Environmental and Financial
- 5.3 Case Study A – employer interview summary, initial impressions, and potential challenges
- 5.4 Case Study B – employer interview summary, initial impressions, and potential challenges
- 5.5 Case Study C – employer interview summary, initial impressions, and potential challenges
- 5.6 Case Study D – employer interview summary, initial impressions, and potential challenges
- 5.7 Case Study E – employer interview summary, initial impressions, and potential challenges
- 5.8 Case Study F – employer interview summary, initial impressions, and potential challenges

15.6 Appendix 6a - WES Discussion

Contains:

- 6a.1 Demographic Data
 - 6a.1.1 Number of respondents to WES
 - 6a.1.2 Ethnicity
 - 6a.1.3 Gender
 - 6a.1.4 Age
 - 6a.1.5 Length of time in current veterinary practice
 - 6a.1.6 Length of time in the veterinary industry
- 6a.2 Vision and Values
- 6a.3 Work Hours and Expectations
- 6a.4 Staff Leave and Benefits
- 6a.5 Health and Safety
- 6a.6 Performance Reviews, Professional Development Plans and Career Pathways
- 6a.7 Communication
- 6a.8 Wellbeing
- 6a.9 Position Description, Utilisation, and Staff ratios
- 6a.10 Sustainable Practices
- 6a.11 Leadership

15.8 Appendix 7 - Case Study Selection

Contains:

- 7.1 Employer interview data influencing selection
- 7.2 Calculations for choosing case studies to continue with focus groups – all agree data
- 7.3 Calculations for choosing case studies to continue with focus groups – strongly agree data
- 7.4 Collated data and decision making

15.9 Appendix 8 -Focus Groups

Contains:

- 8.1 Case Study A – Complete Focus Group Notes
- 8.2 Case Study B - Complete Focus Group Notes
- 8.3 Case Study C - Complete Focus Group Notes
- 8.4 Focus group themes
 - 8.4.1 First impressions on arrival at the veterinary practice
 - 8.4.2 What has been happening since WES completed/general comments
 - 8.4.3 Work hours and expectations
 - 8.4.4 Health and Safety
 - 8.4.5 Performance reviews/professional development and career pathways
 - 8.4.6 Communication
 - 8.4.7 Wellbeing
 - 8.4.8 Team culture/team fit
 - 8.4.9 Position description and utilisation
 - 8.4.10 Staff ratios
 - 8.4.11 Leadership
 - 8.4.13 Charging for services
 - 8.4.14 Discounting
 - 8.4.15 Wages/salary practice perspectives
 - 8.4.16 Wages/salary industry wide issues
 - 8.4.17 Ownership structure

- 8.4.18 Students on work placement

15.10 Appendix 9 -Client Survey

Contains:

- 9.1 Case study A
- 9.2 Case study B
- 9.3 Case study C

15.11 Appendix 10 - COVID-19 Resilience Cross Case Analysis

Contains:

- 10.1 COVID-19 Resilience – Practice Strategy to approaching a crisis
- 10.2 COVID-19 Resilience – Revenue impacts now and potentially long term and any mitigation accessed
- 10.3 COVID-19 Resilience – Staff management/impacts on staff
- 10.4 COVID-19 Resilience – Health and safety challenges
- 10.5 COVID-19 Resilience – Changes that you have implemented now that might be used long term
- 10.6 COVID-19 Resilience – Client responses to the necessary changes
- 10.7 COVID-19 Resilience – Assessment on how the business and staff have managed
- 10.8 COVID-19 Resilience – Any other insights you would like to share

15.13 Appendix 12 - First Draft of a Minimum and Recommended Standards for Staff Wellbeing for the Veterinary Industry

Contains:

- a draft of proposed minimum and recommended standards for staff wellbeing for the veterinary industry

15.15 Appendix 14 - Recommendations for Further Research

Contains:

- 14.1 Encourage the inclusion of the whole team in future research studies relating to veterinary practice structure and wellbeing
- 14.2 Evaluate different ownership models
- 14.3 Evaluate the effects on wellbeing of provision of after-hours and rewards offered to staff
- 14.4 Evaluation of the long hours and 7 day a week model
- 14.5 Support staff utilisation and ratios
- 14.6 Staff salary/wages
- 14.7 Invoicing to clearly account actual inputs
- 14.8 Planned and measured discounting
- 14.9 Client and veterinarian perceptions of the cost of veterinary services
- 14.10 Gender and cultural diversity
- 14.11 Rewarding leading standards in a wider scope
- 14.12 Environmental sustainability
- 14.13 Summary